

By the author of *The Buddha, Geoff and Me*

BODHISATTVA BLUES

A NOVEL



Edward Canfor-Dumas

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Edward Canfor-Dumas

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Copyright

About the Book

Ed's life has gone into reverse gear. Reeling from the dot.com bust, he's broke and single, when to cap it all he's mugged and bumps into an old acquaintance with whom he definitely has some dodgy karma. Oh, and that's not all: he's about to be sued and lose his crappy part-time job. Can things really get any worse?

The answer of course is yes.

When Ed finds himself tangled up in shady property dealings and caring for a fatherless family, he dusts down his old Buddhist principles. And that's when life starts serving up some interesting surprises...

About the Author

Edward Canfor-Dumas is a novelist and an award-winning TV scriptwriter. He was educated at New College, Oxford and after a spell as a comedy writer and performer started writing for popular television series such as *The Bill* and *Kavanagh QC*. His TV work includes *Tough Love*, *Pompeii: the Last Day* and *Supervolcano*. He took a lead role in establishing the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Conflict Issues, launched in February 2007, and in 2011 co-founded Engi, a social enterprise that works with businesses, civil society and government to reduce conflict. He is the author of *The Buddha*, *Geoff and Me* and is a practising Buddhist.

By the same author:

The Buddha in Daily Life (with Richard Causton)

The Buddha, Geoff and Me

Bodhisattva Blues

a novel

Edward Canfor-Dumas



RIDER

LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

To Coralyn, Alexander and Emily – with love.
And laughter.



Chapter One

THERE IS NO such thing as coincidence – that’s what a lot of people believe. For them, everything happens for a reason – it’s God’s will, or the movement of the stars, or karma – and what we call coincidence is just our failure to join the dots, or even to see them.

Maybe. I don’t know. What I do know is that this story starts with a coincidence – or so it seemed at the time.

It was August. Hot. I was earning a bit of money teaching English conversation to twenty-seven gobby Italian teenagers at a summer school on the edge of London – St Catherine’s Academy for Girls. It stood, solid and heavy, in acres of expensive lawn on top of a hill in Hertfordshire. From the hockey pitches I could pan, left to right, from Bentley Priory – once home of RAF Fighter Command – to the green and distant hills of Northwood. Away to the south, the sun flashed off planes gliding in and out of Heathrow.

I’d arrived early to swim in the school’s empty pool. St Catherine’s was like the *Marie Celeste* at this time of year. A gardener riding the tractor-mower across distant grass; from behind the chapel, the rhythmic hammering of the maintenance man fixing something; Tracksuit Wade, the trim and permanently tracksuited sports hall manager, who let me into the changing rooms. And that was it. My Italians were trawling round the Tower of London and I wasn’t due to engage them in chat about Beefeaters, ravens and the Crown Jewels till they returned at half two.

I ploughed my laps, showered and changed, then ambled down the hill to the shops to buy some lunch, swimming

gear in rucksack, pool-wet hair drying in the sun, birds tweeting in the blackberry-laden hedgerows. Down past the golf course, along the footpath through the overgrown churchyard, and out on to the high street opposite the bakery. A crusty roll was cut, buttered, stuffed with ham and tomato, and soon I was heading back to prepare for battle with the Italians.

I turned off the footpath and started up the hill, then stopped to pick a ripe, fat blackberry.

‘Nice one.’

I looked round. Two youths – sixteen, seventeen years old, both black – were sauntering towards me on either side of the road. The speaker, the smaller of the two, was smiling. His mate wasn’t. He just fixed me in his stare as he came closer.

Where had they sprung from? They must have followed me through the churchyard. Not good. This road led only to the school and a few large houses at the top of the hill. Not many people used it.

‘Like blackberries, do you?’ Smiler asked.

‘Pretty much,’ I said, trying to sound relaxed. I put it in my mouth – it was warm from the sun – and strode off.

‘Can we lend your phone?’ I looked back. They were still following me. ‘Only we’re meeting someone and he ain’t turned up.’

Obviously bollocks. ‘Sorry. Haven’t got it with me.’ I kept walking. But suddenly the bigger boy was in front of me – fierce, angry.

‘You fucking stop, you cunt! Stand still!’ He was tense, ready for a fight – and holding a large rock down at his side.

I froze. The moment I saw them I’d expected trouble but still – I was shocked. Lunchtime. Sunshine. A leafy lane. Hardly the place for a mugging. The surprise, the incongruity of it all, rooted me to the spot. Plus the threat of violence, of course.

‘Don’t move – cunt!’ spat Big Boy. He lifted the rock.

My stomach lurched. I could die here, I thought. Bloody hell. He could bring that rock down on my head and ... An image of pink brain oozing through blood and shattered skull flashed before me. I blinked. I couldn’t move. I was so stunned, so confused, so totally unprepared that standing stock-still seemed the only possible action. A rabbit in the headlights – on a sunny, summer’s day.

‘What’s in the bag?’

I passed him the rucksack. As he unzipped it I saw that Smiler, still smiling, had closed in behind me, blocking any escape. Big Boy pulled out the ham and tomato roll in its paper bag, the damp towel wrapped around my swimming shorts and goggles, and gave them to Smiler as he felt inside the rucksack’s main compartment. Empty. He methodically unzipped each of the side pockets. Nothing, except for my keys on a fob.

‘Wallet?’

I shook my head. I’d locked it in my scruffy old Honda Civic while I swam. Ditto my phone.

He took the towel and ham roll from Smiler and stuffed them back in the rucksack, then jammed his hand into my pockets, front and back, searching for cash. Bloody hell, I thought, is this a violation or what? I started to get angry, and as I did, my mind began to clear. Fight them both? No – two against one and Big Boy especially looked fit and muscular. Leg it? No – probably faster than me. Shout for help? No one around to hear. Ergo – just take it.

Then I remembered something I’d seen on TV about moments like this: you had to try to note some detail about your attacker. Something physical, a piece of clothing, a way of talking, a smell – anything. Difficult, but it could be a game-changer for the police.

By now Big Boy had found the handful of change in my pockets and was looking disappointed: £2.35 and a set of keys obviously wasn’t much return for a lunchtime’s

robbing. He handed back the rucksack and I noticed a diamond stud in his ear. Perhaps they'll leave me alone now, I thought. Big Boy had other ideas.

'Where you parked?'

Oh Christ – he's going to nick my car, the only thing I own worth any money; that and my laptop. How do I get out of this? Then something else popped into my mind: 'When the Buddha nature manifests from within, it receives protection from without.' Blimey. Where had that come from? I hadn't been around Buddhism for years, but I'd been a real enthusiast for a while, had even written a little book about it, and suddenly, almost as a reflex, I remembered the chant and said it in my head – just once. And bugger me – at that very moment a car appeared around the bend, climbing the hill.

Coincidence?

Big Boy dropped the rock. 'Don't move,' he muttered.

But this was my only chance. As the car got nearer I fluttered a hand down at my side, waving – willing – the car to stop. It did. Amazing.

The boys jumped as if they'd been zapped with a Taser. Smiler grabbed the keys from Big Boy, thrust them into my hand – how weird was that? – and without a word they sprinted past the car down the hill. A skidding turn at the footpath and they were gone. The attack had lasted less than two minutes.

'Ed?'

The driver was staring at me through the open window, astonished. My jaw dropped. It was my old boss, my old nemesis: Martin.

Now, *that's* what I call a coincidence.

I'd worked for Martin during the dot.com bubble, as a copywriter in a crappy online company called ItsTheBusiness.Com. We hadn't hit it off, to put it mildly, and things had turned really sour when the company went bust, owing me and a lot of others a lot of money. But

Martin was a survivor, a ducker-and-diver. He fell on his feet with a rich investor friend and came up trumps in property development. The irony was that I helped him do it – with Buddhism. He thought I was an arrogant twat – and I loathed his Thatcherite guts – but he was that desperate he'd have tried anything. I taught him the little I knew – I was just getting into it at the time – and he staggered me by turning things around. He even paid me all the money he owed.

I hadn't seen him for a decade and here he was – a stone heavier, hair thinning, puffier and redder in the face (I guessed he liked a drink), but obviously doing well. He was driving a shiny new BMW 7 Series.

'Martin! Bloody hell.'

'What you doing here?'

'I just been mugged.'

'What – those bastards?' I nodded. 'You got a phone, want to call the police?' He found his mobile and offered it through the window.

'Cheers.' I was surprised to see my hand shaking as I called 999. I told the operator what had happened, then handed back the phone. 'They said to wait. They'll get a unit here as soon as possible.'

Martin grunted. 'What you doing here anyway?'

I told him about the summer school and the ham and tomato roll and the blackberry, and he told me he owned one of the large houses at the top of the hill – the one behind the tall trees and hoarding and razor-wire. He'd bought the original property just after Lehman Brothers tanked – the owner had needed 'liquidity' fast – then demolished it and built a much grander mansion on the site. The idea was to cash in as the economy picked up, but he'd hit a snag.

'What?'

'Oh, just one of the millions of bleeding bumps you get in the property game. Happens all the time. Anyway, can't sell

it till that's sorted, so it's mothballed.'

'Uh-huh. So you're still in the property game then?'

'For my sins, yeah.' He glanced at his watch. 'Look, I'm meeting someone at the house. Hop in and I'll drop you at the school. You can tell the police to meet you there. If they want me as a witness or whatever I'll give you my number - OK?'

'Fair enough. Thanks.' I got in the car and sank into the soft leather seat. 'Mmm - nice.'

Martin smiled. 'Nought to sixty in 4.7 seconds. But it's a hybrid, so it's green too - just in case you're wondering.'

I wasn't, but I was impressed. We glided up the hill.

'Amazing coincidence, eh?' Martin seemed chuffed.

'Though I suppose you Buddhists would say it wasn't a coincidence at all, eh?'

'How d'you mean?'

'Well, you helped me out of a hole back then and I got you out of one just now. Cause and effect.'

'Guess so.' I hadn't seen it like that but it was an interesting angle.

He slowed as we passed his boarded-up site - no sign of his visitor - then gunned the BMW another fifty yards, turned into St Catherine's and pulled up alongside my Honda - the only other car there. He dug out a business card.

'In case the cops want a statement.'

'Thanks.'

'And what's your number?' I hesitated. Did I want him calling me? But I couldn't not tell him, not after what he'd just done. He tapped it into his phone. 'Let's not leave it another ten years,' he said. We shook hands, I got out, he gave a cheery wave and off he drove.

I called the police again and told them where I was, then sat in the car processing the last ten minutes. The mugging had shaken me up but so had Martin's sudden reappearance in my life. And the fact that he'd appeared

just after I'd done that chant in my head – v-e-e-ery weird. I didn't conjure him out of thin air, obviously – he was en route to his meeting and would have turned that corner whatever I'd thought or done. But the coincidence of help appearing at that precise moment, and of it being him: that's what I couldn't get my head around.

What's more, this was my third summer at St Catherine's. In my first year that old house he'd bought was being demolished, and last summer the mansion was going up in its place. Then this summer I'd arrived to find everything had ground to a halt and razor-wire everywhere. So in all that time our lives had been a few yards apart and never crossed – until now. In a way that was as strange as bumping into each other. A different sort of coincidence perhaps?

Or was there really no such thing, only 'co-incidences': incidents that literally coincide, which we then try to fit into some framework of explanation that satisfies us? Martin had mentioned the Buddhist framework – the vast web of cause and effect that connects everything, as if his car coming along at that precise moment were the working of a kind of universal balance sheet. I'd saved him in the past and now – somehow, unknowingly – he'd been on hand to save me. Payback.

Hmm.

I remembered another great coincidence in my life. It had happened years ago, after university, when I'd decided to hitchhike across America – as you do. I knew only two people in the country – one on each coast – so flew out to California, spent a few days with Steve in San Diego, then he gave me a ride to the Interstate, I stuck out my thumb and off I went.

A few days later I found myself on the outskirts of a little town in northern Arizona, trying to hitch a ride to the Grand Canyon. A camper van slowed to a stop, but instead of picking me up it deposited a dark-haired, lanky guy who

turned out to be a Brit: Nick, from Leeds, exploring the country for a few weeks before joining ICI's research department. He was heading for the Grand Canyon too, so we joined forces – hitching can be a lonely business.

Before long we got a lift and camped that night on the South Rim; Nick had a tent. Then we hiked down into the Canyon and camped by the Colorado River. After a couple of days of swimming and sunbathing, we hiked back up and hitched a ride out of the park.

But back on the main road no one wanted to pick up two male hitchhikers. So Nick and I decided to shake hands and try our luck solo. Almost at once, as he was walking away, a car stopped for me and off I sailed, waving to Nick as I passed. We hadn't even exchanged addresses.

The next week took me through New Mexico and Texas and – after some humming and hawing – to New Orleans. I didn't have much money and wasn't sure I could afford to stay in the city. But I tracked down the local YMCA, dumped my stuff and went out to explore the French Quarter. It was busy and vibrant after the empty spaces of Texas, heaving with tourists and jazz – and Nick. I bumped into him coming down Bourbon Street. He was gobsmacked. I was gobsmacked. It was gobsmacking. We were 1,500 miles from where we'd parted, we hadn't said where we were going – at the time neither of us knew – and the odds of meeting again were minuscule. Yet here we were.

But what did it mean? Nothing. We spent another couple of days together, sampling the pleasures of the Big Easy, then once again went our separate ways – and I've never seen him since. Now, if he'd been a girl and we'd ended up married with kids I suppose we'd be claiming that it had been destiny that our paths had crossed again. But as it was – nada. It was just a very strange *coincidence*.

So, remembering that, I was pretty chary about reading anything into my renewed acquaintance with Martin.

Except something was bothering me. And as I sat in the St Catherine's car park waiting for the police to turn up, I slowly realised what it was. Meeting Martin again was like looking back into the past. It had been a tough time – the dot.com bust, confusion, my life going nowhere – but I'd found someone and something ... and lost them both. So I'd pressed on – face forward, don't look back – and all the regret had been buried, like a mine.

Meeting Martin again was like stepping on it. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there was pain in my chest, my lungs. A sharp stab in the throat.

Ah, Dora. My muse, the love of my life – once. She was a real grown-up: smart, sexy, beautiful. I'd met her through Geoff, the guy who'd introduced me to Buddhism, and I loved her toughness, her no-nonsense, no-bullshit attitude. Her clarity, determination, courage. Her refusal to be beaten. Her lack of sentimentality. Her energy. But it's a funny thing about relationships: what first attracts you can eventually become the very thing that drives you apart.

'The trouble with socialism,' said Oscar Wilde, 'is that it takes up too many evenings.' And so it was with Dora's Buddhism.

She was full on, dedicated. She held meetings, she went to meetings, she held meetings to plan other meetings. And when she wasn't at a meeting she was on a course. Or organising one. Or out visiting other Buddhists, supporting them, encouraging them, teaching them how to plan meetings and courses, and deal with the thousand natural shocks of their daily lives. Which was all totally noble. I admired and respected what she did, how much she gave to other people. And she insisted she got loads in return: vitality, satisfaction, a sense of always growing and developing. But it dominated everything. At times I thought: This must be what it's like to live with an elite athlete, whose whole life is built around training and performance, getting the right sleep and nutrition, all

aimed at achieving one goal. And you either get with the programme or ... you don't. And I didn't. I practised alongside her for a while but I just couldn't keep up.

Eventually, I stopped. The old me reappeared: cynical, booze-loving, lazy. And if there was one thing Dora couldn't stand it was someone not trying. 'Up to forty a man can get by on charm,' she'd say. 'After that it's strictly results.'

Stupidly, I didn't hear the warning – and a few days after my thirty-sixth birthday she kicked me out.

Fair enough – I deserved it. Even the charm had gone, such as it was. But looking back, what a twat I was. With her as a partner I was changing, growing. I even wrote a book, for God's sake. Actually finished it. How amazing is that? For me, very. But it was all thanks to Dora – she cracked the whip. If only she hadn't cracked it all the time.

My phone rang: Martin.

'Mart. Hi. What's up?'

'I'm looking at them.'

'Who?'

'Those bastards that took your £2.35.'

'Where?'

'Bus stop in the high street – by the baker's. Want to follow them, see where they go?'

'I'm waiting for the police.'

'Call them from the car. Should be there by now anyway, useless bastards.'

I checked my watch. One thirty. Still an hour before the Italians returned. I was supposed to be on site from two o'clock but ... 'Right – one minute.'

I fired up the Civic, hared down the hill, turned on to the high street and drove past the bus stop. Empty. Martin was standing on the corner opposite.

'They got on a 258 – come on!'

I slotted into a parking space, ran to his waiting Beamer and jumped in.

'Exciting, isn't it?'

‘Will be if we can catch the black bastards,’ he said. I winced. ‘What?’

‘Black bastards. Sounds a bit—’

‘They’re black and they’re bastards. Just calling a spade a spade.’ He grinned at his joke and pulled out into traffic.

‘It’s not racist, it’s descriptive.’

I decided to let it pass. This wasn’t the moment to challenge Martin’s social attitudes. The bus was in sight, a dozen cars ahead, grinding up the hill.

‘You’re sure they’re on it?’

‘On the top deck, at the back. By the window.’ He pointed.

There they were, sitting with arms stretched wide across the back of the seat, relaxed. I dug out my phone and called 999. The operator grasped the situation immediately.

‘Stay on the line, caller, and keep the bus in sight. We’ll direct the unit to you.’

I told Martin. ‘More fun than property development, eh?’

He grunted. ‘Except when a fat lump of dosh lands in your account.’

‘How was your meeting?’

‘Bastard blew me out.’ He glanced at me. ‘Ginger bastard this time. They’re the worst.’ He grinned again.

We followed the bus up the hill, then along the top and down the other side, pulling over to wait at a distance every time it stopped for passengers. The two youths didn’t move till we got to the depot at Harrow Weald, end of the line. We stopped a few car lengths back as the bus disgorged everyone. The youths jumped off – and headed straight for us.

‘Christ.’ I got busy with my laces. Martin fiddled with the car mat under his feet. But Smiler and Big Boy walked past, oblivious.

We sat up again. Behind us they were crossing the road to a small park. I relayed the information to the police operator.

‘Keep them in sight, caller,’ she urged. ‘A unit’s on its way.’

‘There’s only one other gate, round the back,’ said Martin.

‘How do you know?’ I asked as he pulled a U-turn.

‘Grew up round here.’

We drove along the park perimeter, tracking the youths through the railings as they moseyed across the grass, then we turned down a quiet side street, pulled over and waited. I updated the operator and after a moment a young man emerged, bag slung over his shoulder, and headed away from us. A brief pause, then Smiler and Big Boy appeared – and followed him. I looked at Martin.

‘You don’t suppose ...?’

He frowned, put the car in gear, and crawled forward. Ahead, the young man turned out of sight, followed moments later by Smiler and Big Boy. Martin pumped the accelerator, the Beamer surged down the road, then he eased off and we coasted towards the turning – the entrance to the car park of a small block of flats. He slowed to a stop. I lowered the window and listened. Silence. Then a shout – pain. Martin edged the car forward – and we gasped.

The young man was hanging on desperately to his shoulder bag. Big Boy was pulling at it, punching him repeatedly with his free hand. Smiler was riding on the young man’s back, an arm round his neck.

‘Hey!’ Martin yelled and gunned the engine. The car leapt at the trio. Smiler and Big Boy looked round, startled. Martin stood on the brake, the car jolted to a halt and they dashed past us on to the street – just as a cop car appeared. Big Boy darted right, Smiler left. The cop car disappeared after him.

We jumped out of the Beamer. ‘You all right, mate?’

Daft question. The young man was staggering around in a daze, blood pouring from his nose, one eye purple and

swollen shut. I left him to Martin and ran to the street. To the right – nothing. Big Boy had obviously cut back into the park. But to the left – result. Smiler was spreadeagled on the bonnet of the police car, being handcuffed – and still smiling.

Fifteen minutes later Martin and I were heading back to St Catherine's. The police had taken our details and told me to get to my local nick as soon as possible to give a statement. I calculated I'd just about make it back to school for two thirty – I could pick up my car later – and all being well, no one would notice I'd not been there for two o'clock.

But all was not well.

We pulled into the school car park just as a stretcher was being loaded into an ambulance. Looking on were my class of Italians, oddly quiet, alongside Tracksuit Wade and the gardener – and Mrs Armstrong, the deputy head. She was fierce at the best of times – and this clearly wasn't one of them.

'Gawd. Now what?' I swallowed hard, got out of the car and went over.

'Ah. Nice of you to join us.' She looked daggers at me.

'Sorry, I was, um, I was mugged.'

'Mugged? When?' She sounded incredulous.

'Just down the hill. I've been with the police. We caught one of them.' She raised an eyebrow, righteous anger suddenly punctured by doubt, then glanced quizzically over at the BMW. 'Passer-by,' I explained. 'Came to my aid.'

The ambulance doors slammed. Inside was Valeria Adamoli, fifteen, with a split head, concussion and a broken arm.

'We're lucky it's not a broken neck,' said Mrs Armstrong through tight lips. The class had arrived back early and, thinking I was here, Tracksuit Wade had told them to go to the classroom. They'd got bored, turned up one of their

iPlayers and Valeria, the class clown, had treated them all to a dance – on one of the desks. It tipped over, she fell ...

‘And now I shall have to call her parents in Milan to explain why we failed in our duty of care. Why there was no teacher present.’

‘Just tell the truth,’ I said. ‘I’m sure they’ll understand.’

‘What – that you can’t walk down the road the school’s in without being mugged? Very reassuring. Anyway, I’ve asked Miss Wade to take the class for the afternoon. You and I need to make sure we have the facts absolutely clear – for the insurance. Or if the Adamolis decide to sue ...’

She left the implication hanging heavy in the air. A car horn beeped: Martin, wanting to get away. I waved, he signalled that I should call him and drove off. Mrs Armstrong’s eyes narrowed.

‘Very friendly for a passer-by – almost as if he knew you.’

I took a deep breath and started to explain about coincidences.

It was no good. I’d hardly closed my front door later that afternoon when my phone rang. It was the chair of the governors, no less, to say my contract was being terminated. Several of the kids had called home about Valeria, their parents had rung the school to find out what the hell was going on, ‘And all in all we think it best if we just draw a line under the whole thing and find a new teacher.’ I was outraged – I’d been mugged, for Christ’s sake! But he wouldn’t budge and even refused to pay for the two weeks left on my contract. I blustered about suing but he told me – politely and poshly – to get stuffed.

So that was that. Bye-bye to another beautiful relationship. Bye-bye to that lovely empty swimming pool. And bye-bye to a reference for a pile of job applications I was writing. *Sayonara* St Catherine’s – *hola!* unemployment. Teaching English to foreigners was getting

more and more competitive. Emptiness beckoned for the rest of the year – and beyond.

How the hell had I ended up here again? No job, no woman, money running out, driving a beat-up car that nearly bankrupted me every time I filled the tank, and living in a poky little house whose mortgage I could only afford thanks to Chris the creepy lodger. He was a small, balding trainee actuary from Preston who kept weird hours and told the same joke whenever he met someone new: 'I'm training to be an actuary, which is like being an accountant – only not as exciting.' Sheesh. Friends who'd been with me through university had careers, families, wealth – fame even. So why not me?

I slumped on to the sofa. Karma – that's what Dora would have said. The same old thinking driving the same old action, leading to the same old dead-end. Groundhog Day, all over again. But what to do?

I knew what she would have said to that, too. Chant, challenge, change. Chant to reveal your wisdom, courage and compassion. Challenge your thinking and behaviour – and your situation *must* change. The oneness of life and its environment. But try to change your situation without challenging your thinking or behaviour and it'll just revert to a different version of the same thing. Simple – in theory. And easier said than done. Like losing weight. You know you just have to eat less but, the moment you start to cut down, your mind and body rebel – *we want food!* Put your whole life on a diet and the rioting's constant.

There was only one thing for it – a nice big glass of wine. It was early, not even six o'clock, but this was a crisis. I was uncorking the Shiraz when my phone rang: Martin again.

'Ed, mate, how are you?' I told him the news from the school. 'Shit, no – the bastards! But you were mugged, you were the victim!'

'Story of my life, Mart.'

‘Well, at least you’ve got your Buddhism, eh? You know, for inner strength.’

‘Mmm.’ I didn’t want to tell him I’d fallen off that wagon, disillusion him.

‘Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk about – if you’ve got the time.’

‘Erm ...’

‘In fact, I was wondering if we might go for a drink or something.’

‘What – now?’

‘Well, yeah. Unless you’re doing something?’

I put the cork back into the bottle of Shiraz. Might as well drink with him as on my own.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘If you’re buying. Only I’m a bit skint at the moment.’

Irony of ironies – so was Martin.

He confessed all over a pint. He’d sunk nearly two million quid into the house near St Catherine’s and needed another million ‘or thereabouts’ to finish it. He reckoned he could sell it for five and come out two million ahead, but the bank wasn’t playing ball and he couldn’t raise the cash anywhere on terms he’d accept.

‘A sniff of desperation and they go for the jugular,’ he said bitterly.

‘Why won’t the bank cough up?’

He laughed at my naïvety. ‘Because, my son, that way they get their hands on the place cheap and flog it themselves – plus everything else I own. It’s all collateral for the loan.’

‘You mean – you’re looking at going bust again?’

He nodded grimly – ‘That ginger no-show was my last chuck of the dice’ – and took a pull at his beer.

‘Blimey. Talk about karma.’

‘Go on then.’

'Er, Groundhog Day. You know, the same situation keeps on coming round.'

'Yeah – that's me. Rise and fall with the bubble du jour.' Through another slug of beer.

'You married, family?'

He nodded. 'Two kids, six and eight. At prep school. Thing is' – he grimaced – 'the wife doesn't know about any of it.'

'What – you pledged your house without telling her?' He nodded glumly. I gave a soft whistle. 'Well, Mart, I got to say, for a man on the verge of bankruptcy you were pretty cool this afternoon. Wouldn't have guessed a thing.'

He barked a laugh. 'Piece of piss. I just pretended those bastards were a couple of banksters I know who all of a sudden aren't returning my calls.'

'Right. So the fact the building's taken so long ...?'

'Cash-flow, planning. Original buyer pulling out. I only started cos I had a guaranteed sale – till he went tits up in Spain, property crash. Sodding euro.'

I shook my head. The disaster he was staring at put mine in the shade.

'So what can I do?'

'Well, unless you got a million under the bed ...?'

'If only you'd asked me this time last week.'

He grinned, then went all serious.

'Thing is, Ed, when It'sTheBusiness went under you told me that Buddhist thing – *Kyo Chi Gyo I*, right?' I nodded. It was a principle Dora taught me, a variant on chant, challenge, change. 'Well, last time it worked like magic and this time it's just not. I'm getting closer and closer to the edge, and it's a million times worse than back then cos now it's my wife and kids involved too.'

'Right. So ...?'

'So then it hit me – wham! Meeting you today wasn't a coincidence. It was fate. I turn up at exactly the right

moment in your life – and you turn up at exactly the right moment in mine.'

'Because ...?' I was starting to feel uneasy.

'To teach me how to do Buddhism – properly.'

'Eh?'

'It all makes sense now. I mean, you wrote a book, didn't you? You know! You got the knowledge, the nous, the direct line.'

'Me?'

'Yes! So I want you to teach me everything, the complete works. The chanting, the philosophy, the weirdo language. And I'll do it – hundred per cent.'

'Uh-huh ...'

'Absolutely. I tried everything else to turn this shit around and, so far ...' He drew a finger across his throat. 'You're my last hope, Ed.'

What could I say? I hadn't thought about this stuff for years. I gave him a weak smile.

'No pressure, then?'

That night I chanted for the first time in years. I made sure Chris wasn't in, then closed the door to my room, found my beads still in their silk pouch at the back of my sock drawer, sat in front of a blank wall and started. It was like getting back on an old bike. And very soon I was absorbed.

I had a disciple. Blimey. But how could I teach him when I didn't do it myself any more? OK, I owed him for rescuing me but what he wanted in return would mean commitment, spending time with him, being patient ... And to be brutally honest, I still didn't like him. Part of me even thought he deserved his disaster. He'd been a huge fan of Mrs Thatcher, the market, deregulation – and it had turned round and bitten him. Hard. Twice. His wife and kids though – that was tough. It wasn't their fault and now they'd be on the street or in some grim B&B with a two-

ring cooker and sharing a bathroom with four other families ...

As I chanted I saw in my mind's eye his car coming round the bend of the hill, and Smiler and Big Boy's reaction – their fear. They were going to get what they deserved, too. The police said it was only a matter of time till they caught Big Boy; he was probably already in their system somewhere. And without realising it I'd rewind the mugging to its beginning: 'Nice one.' Only this time Big Boy ordered me to stop, showed me the rock in his hand – and I curled my lip in contempt.

'What you gonna do with that then?'

Before he could answer I karate-kicked it out of his hand, then thump, chop, punch, kick, elbow! And suddenly they're both on the ground, groaning.

'How d'you like that! Eh, eh?'

I rewind the scene again. And again. And again. Playing and replaying it with slight variations, each time coming out on top, putting them to flight or leaving them in a bloody and battered heap. Threaten me, would you? Rob me, would you? Put the fucking fear of God into me, would you, eh? Hey – I'm talking to you, punk!

There was a knock at the door. 'You all right, Ed?' It was Chris.

'What? Oh, yeah. Fine – cheers.'

I'd hadn't realised it but I'd been running and rerunning this fight fantasy out loud. Gawd, how embarrassing. Perhaps I could pretend it was a play on the radio. I looked at my watch and got another surprise: I'd been chanting and muttering to myself for nearly an hour. Get a grip. But I felt better, strangely. Beating up Smiler and Big Boy in my imagination was venting all the anger and humiliation I felt; regaining some power and control after feeling so helpless. And such a coward.

Then I remembered with shock something I'd censored from my memory of the event. When I'd seen that rock in

Big Boy's hand I'd ... begged. Yes, begged. 'Please don't hurt me.' That was my automatic reaction – animal fear. Cowardice. Pathetic pleading. It was so shameful I'd instantly buried it. But chanting had recovered it, remembered it, released it. Wow. Powerful ju-ju.

I chanted some more and quickly came to another realisation. There was no way I could look after Martin. There was no way I *wanted* to. I had to pass him on to someone else, some other Buddhist, and only one person came to mind. I texted Piers straight away.



Chapter Two

TWO NIGHTS LATER I was sitting with Martin by the art nouveau fireplace in the front room of Piers's neat, terraced house in Kilburn. We'd just done gongyo, the basic practice – weird for Martin but for me like slipping on a pair of old sandals – and were settling down with half a dozen others to talk Buddhism. This was the locals' monthly discussion meeting, where they shared with each other – and anyone else who was interested – their understanding and experiences of the practice. Piers and I had lost contact when I'd split up with Dora, but he'd sounded genuinely pleased to hear from me and as soon as I mentioned Martin he'd invited us both to come along. So here we were.

Piers was one of life's nice guys – and awfully posh. Tall, lean, angular, with an accent only the best private education can buy, in another life he'd have been a captain in the Guards. In this one he was a landscape gardener. I'd met him soon after *ItsTheBusiness.Com* had gone under, when I was at rock bottom and desperate for a job. Dora used to run this little employment agency – that was how I'd met her – and she'd sent me along to him for a few days' hard labour.

At first he'd raised every left-wing hackle on my body – his accent, mainly – but pretty soon my opinion changed. He was decent, sincere, hardworking and treated me not as an employee but an equal. We had some great chats as we dug and delved together and I came to see that my problem with him was just that: my problem. Hard to admit it but I was prejudiced – reverse snobbery.